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## Standards of Media Coverage of Elections in Ukraine

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### Abstract

The paper explores the standards of media coverage of elections in Ukraine, focusing primarily on the news TV programs. While providing a brief overview of the practices of electoral coverage by Ukrainian media throughout last decade, the paper specifically addresses the most recent presidential election campaign of 2009-2010 as a case study. The paper presents the results of news monitoring, outlining major trends in media coverage of election campaigns in Ukraine. The problem of paid-for coverage and its implications for the development of media system in Ukraine are discussed.

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## **Standards of Media Coverage of Elections in Ukraine**

### **1. Introduction**

The issue of electoral coverage by mass media is widely addressed by media and communication scholars, both in terms of conceptualisations and empirical research. This is largely explained by the fact that the mass media are viewed as important actors in the political life of societies and contribute to shaping public perceptions. The function of informing is broadly associated with the capacity to influence public opinion. This particularly concerns the role of media at election time, when the media are primary sources for information on campaigns, both in established democracies and societies in transition.<sup>1</sup> The electorate, as well as political actors, are highly dependent upon the election news coverage due to the flow of information.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, informing is largely considered in relation to possible influence on electoral behaviour. And although scholarship is still divided on the questions about the nature and effect of political information disseminated by media, few would dispute that unbiased election coverage is a prerequisite for fair and honest elections. Both scholars and practitioners are concerned with biased coverage of election campaigns because such practices undermine traditional functions of mass media in society.

Given that, analysis of election coverage by media has implications not only for the study of the media system of a country, but of the entire political system. Since media are at present a mainstream arena for political communication, election campaigns are a time when political communication reaches extraordinary levels. As political leaders and organisations try to influence voters to affiliate with their positions, it is media that have to provide balanced information to the audience. Thus, the way the media respond to political communication of competing actors has implications for the whole society, as well as political system.

In this respect, analysis of standards of electoral coverage by Ukrainian media reveals trends in the development of media system in Ukraine, on the one hand, and peculiarities of the country's transformation towards democracy, on the other hand. This is also important in the context of the topic of public broadcasting, because the whole essence of the public broadcasting concept is to provide the way for independent and unbiased media coverage. If Ukrainian media have a poor experience of unbiased coverage of elections, the introduction of public broadcasting service is likely to be affected by the embedded practices of biased journalism.

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<sup>1</sup> DALTON ET AL. 1998, SEMETKO 2009

<sup>2</sup> STRÖMBÄCK/LUENGO 2008



Such factors that define journalistic principles and standards such as honesty, independence of opinion, fair judgement, and news values<sup>1</sup> are the basis for unbiased coverage of elections by media. They are also taken as criteria for analyzing journalists' materials covering election campaigns.

Below, the major peculiarities of Ukrainian media system in terms of independent coverage since the second half of the 1990s will be briefly outlined and then the findings of the news monitoring during the latest election campaign of 2009-2010 will be discussed.

## **2. Independence of Media Coverage in the Period of 1991-2008**

After Ukraine became independent in 1991, the country's leadership declared the end of state censorship and confirmed the right to private ownership, which eventually led to the fast growing number of media, both press and broadcasting companies.<sup>2</sup> Within ten years the media system was predominantly privately held. However, it turned out that most private owners had very close links with political elites. This particularly concerned large television channels that remained mainstream sources of information.<sup>3</sup> DYCZOK 2009 notes that one of the notable trends of Ukrainian media system of that time was that many new media outlets were created for purposes of influence rather than to provide the public with information or generate profits. Media scholars and observers generally agree on that Ukraine's political and economic elite quite effectively manipulated the mainstream mass media from the mid-1990s.<sup>4</sup> In conditions of backsliding democracy, such imposed control over major media resulted in the biased coverage of political processes, events and actors, which evidently reached its height during election campaigns.

Thus, during the 2002 Parliamentary election campaign, the mainstream media was clearly biased in favour of the so-called party of power, the pro-presidential bloc „*For A United Ukraine*“ („*Za Yedynu Ukrayinu*“), while either excluding opposition parties or presenting them in a negative light.<sup>5</sup> According to media observers, more than half the election coverage on television was devoted to the bloc „*For A United Ukraine*“, while the main opposition bloc „*Our Ukraine*“ received only 13 % of the coverage, most of which was negative in tone.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> TSETSUR/GRYNKO 2009

<sup>2</sup> DYCZOK 2009

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> DYCZOK 2006

<sup>5</sup> DYCZOK 2009

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

In 2004 the ruling elite strengthened their efforts to use media to win the presidency, embarking on a multi-dimensional „Stop Yushchenko“ project that incorporated media aspect. According to DY CZOK 2009, media part of the campaign used at least three tactics:

- 1) continued and expanded news censorship, including denying Yushchenko access,
- 2) discrediting Yushchenko in analytical and current affairs shows,
- 3) the use and abuse of advertising.

The ruling elite controlled the majority of key media either directly via *temnyky*, instructions to newsrooms on how to cover and present political news, or indirectly through loyal media owners and top-managers.<sup>1</sup> However, the Orange Revolution and subsequent change of elite brought transformation of relations between political actors, media owners, media managers and journalists.<sup>2</sup> The new ruling elite had lost control over privately owned media and many newsrooms switched to more balanced news coverage. Yet, the 2006 parliamentary election campaign marked a shift towards paid-for coverage.<sup>3</sup> Media owners and managers started practices of selling news program time to different political forces. The 2007 parliamentary election campaign reinforced such practices with media owners becoming major actors who negotiated „media plans“ of coverage with major political forces and their headquarters.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, disappointment with the results of the Orange Revolution contributed to the growing loyalty of journalists to cash for coverage practices, media analysts noted.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Independence of Media Coverage during the Presidential Election Campaign of 2009-2010**

Similar trends were observed during the recent presidential election campaign of 2009-2010, as shown by the monitoring conducted under the project of the non-governmental organisation Internews Network „U-Media“ (Monitoring of compliance with journalism standards and increasing media literacy of Ukrainian citizens) by Telekritika and Institute of Mass Information. The monitoring covered major news programs of the 8 leading TV channels, as well as four nation-wide printed publications (see table 1). However, news programs on TV are of particular interest in terms of standards of electoral coverage because news programs are supposed to be the least biased and most balanced in terms of providing information.

The monitoring showed that the practice of paid-for news was widely used by most leading TV channels during the 2009-2010 election campaign. Paid-for

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<sup>1</sup> DY CZOK 2009, p. 22

<sup>2</sup> DOV ZHENKO 2010

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



news, also known in Ukraine as „*dzhynsa*“, implies distortion of neutrality of information, creation of an obviously positive or negative image through violation of such standards as credibility of the news, balance of opinion, journalists' personal evaluation and judgment.<sup>1</sup> In most cases journalist materials that had traits of paid-for news were represented by short pieces of news about election campaign events of candidates, like meetings with voters, press-conferences, electoral tour events, electoral promises and statements of candidates etc.<sup>2</sup> Some TV channels (Inter and ICTV) even made special sections in news programs to cover such campaign events.<sup>3</sup> News of this kind generally presents little or no news value at all. Moreover, the concept of balance is also violated because only one candidate's statement is represented.

Table 1:  
The Number of Materials with Violations of Standards  
as Evidence About Possible „Paid-for“ Status of the Materials,  
in Major News Programs of Nation-wide TV Channels,  
by Weeks of Election Campaign

Week	ICTV	„In-ter“	Novyi	First National	„1+1“	„Ukrai-na“	STB	Channel 5
19. - 24.10.2009	7	3	7	7	4	1	2	0
26. - 31.10.2009	12	4	6	5	8	3	3	4
2. - 7.11.2009	15	6	4	7	9	5	6	1
9. - 21.11.2009	Data absent due to technical reasons							
23. - 29.11.2009	17	18	9	7	9	8	5	0
30.11. - 5.12.2009	28	27	13	11	13	14	5	0
7. - 12.12.2009	33	26	14	15	11	9	7	3
14. - 19.12.2009	29	30	18	17	6	9	9	2
21. - 26.12.2009	30	32	21	19	18	9	10	7
28.12.2009 - 2.01.2010	Data absent due to technical reasons							
04. - 09.01.2010	20	21	10	8	7	12	-	10
11. - 16.01.2010	26	27	21	19	17	12	10	-
<b>The number of materials</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>27</b>

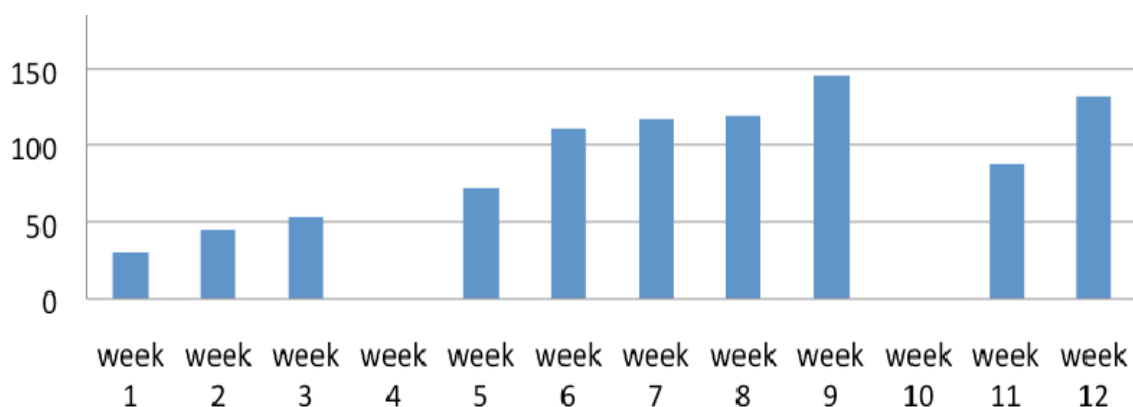
Source: TELEKRYTYKA/INSTITUTE OF MASS INFORMATION 2009-2010,  
TELEKRYTYKA 2010

<sup>1</sup> KULIAS 2009

<sup>2</sup> DOVZHENKO 2010

<sup>3</sup> DOVZHENKO 2010

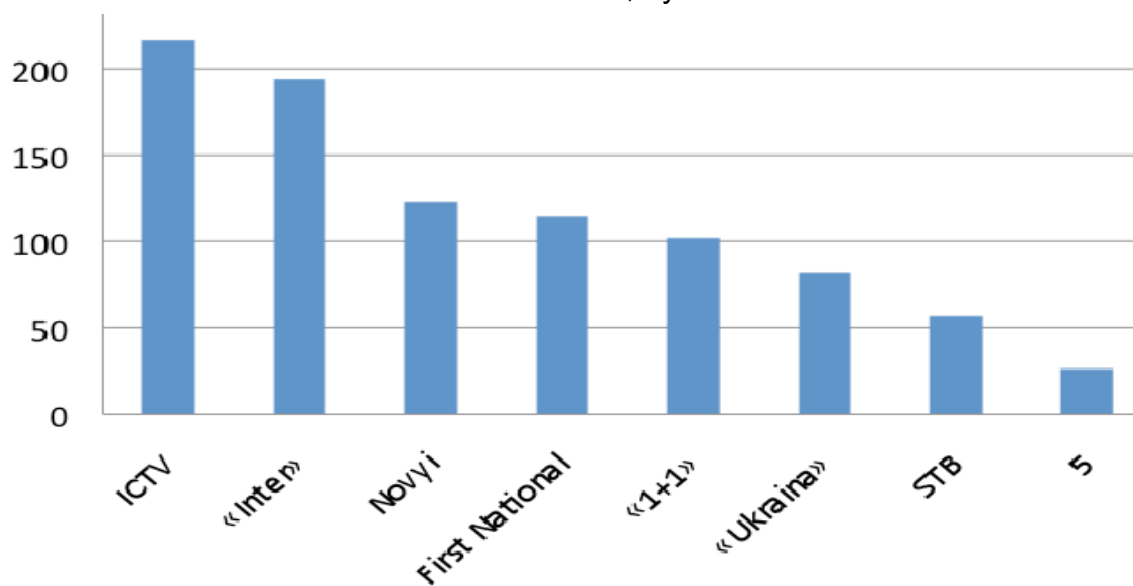
Graph 1:  
The Number of Materials, by Week



Source: TELEKRYTYKA/INSTITUTE OF MASS INFORMATION 2009-2010,  
TELEKRYTYKA 2010

The graph 1 shows the trend of largely growing number of paid-for news in the course of the election campaign. Graph 2 shows the distribution of biased content on different TV channels.

Graph 2:  
The Number of Materials, by TV Channel



Source: TELEKRYTYKA/INSTITUTE OF MASS INFORMATION 2009-2010,  
TELEKRYTYKA 2010

Another finding of the monitoring concerns the lack of journalists' critical approach to politicians. Sayings of politicians per se are considered sufficient for making news even when such sayings do not in fact make news.<sup>1</sup> Journalists frequently used materials provided by politicians' press-service, for instance,

<sup>1</sup> KULIAS 2009

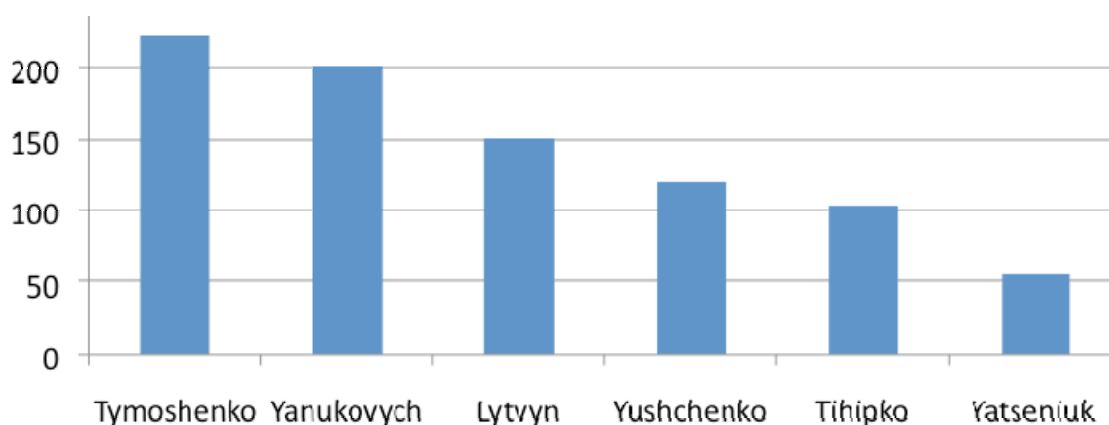


video. As a result, they simply reiterated what this or that politician said without bothering to check the facts and other aspects of the story. All in all, covered topics were frequently not newsworthy.

Media experts noted that 2009 election campaign marked a huge presence of paid-for news from competing candidates, thus contributing to the emergence of the so-called paid-for „pluralism“ in the news when different candidates can pay for presence in news.<sup>1</sup> In private communication, journalists admitted that channels' managers claimed that by providing coverage for cash to different candidates they secure some sort of pluralism and balance.

At the same time, the monitoring showed unequal access of candidates to the media (see graph 3). Most of the news pieces that had traits of paid-for news contributed to positive coverage of six main candidates (Tymoshenko, Yanukovich, Lytvyn, Yushchenko, Tihipko and Yatseniuk). There were a few instances of materials that had traits of paid-for news concerning some other candidates, but the activities of only six candidates were covered on a daily basis. The monitoring found a comparatively small number of examples of negative coverage among those news items that had traits of paid-for news.

Graph 3:  
The Number of Materials, by Candidates



Source: TELEKRYTYKA/INSTITUTE OF MASS INFORMATION 2009-2010,  
TELEKRYTYKA 2010

#### 4. Conclusions

To sum up, the monitoring of TV news coverage of 2009-2010 election campaign revealed the growing trend towards cash for coverage news. Most of the observed news programs contained short news stories about election campaign activities of multiple candidates, although predominantly about 6 candidates out of 18 officially registered. Media observers pointed out that media owners and top managers stirred up massive cash for coverage practices during election

<sup>1</sup> DOVZHENKO 2010





campaign, while journalists remained largely loyal to such practices.<sup>1</sup> The informal claims of media managers that such approach provides for balance in news on election campaign demonstrates lack of understanding of journalist standards of covering elections.

The results of the discussed monitoring, as well as observations of media coverage of previous election campaigns, demonstrate that Ukraine's mainstream media largely violate journalistic standards of honest, transparent and unbiased coverage of election process, which definitely has implications for the development of Ukraine's media system towards high standards of journalism and hinders the overall democratisation process in Ukraine.

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<sup>1</sup> DOVZHENKO 2010



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